



NORTH WEST CONSORTIUM DOCTORAL TRAINING PARTNERSHIP

Guidance on Collaborative PhDs for the Benefit of Proposed Partner Organisations

(September 2017 entry)

Introduction

The North West Consortium is one of eleven doctoral training partnerships (DTPs) funded by the AHRC to provide studentships and a programme of doctoral training for PhD students in the arts and humanities across seven higher education institutions (HEIs) in the North West. These are the Universities of Liverpool, Lancaster, Salford, Keele, Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, and the Royal Northern College of Music. It awards its studentships to a prospective student on the basis of his/her track record and the quality of the research proposal which the student has submitted. For the 2017 studentship competition it is able to receive applications for collaborative PhD projects. However, AHRC rules require that these must be projects owned by the student applicants: i.e. we are not allowed, on the model of the AHRC's Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA) scheme, to fund projects proposed by academic and collaborating supervisors who then recruit a student.

What defines a collaborative PhD?

An increasing number of PhD projects involve an element of collaboration with a non-HEI organisation, for example in the form of short-term placements. But what distinguishes a collaborative PhD is that the collaborating organisation provides a co-supervisor who is an integral member of the collaborative team and who plays a full role in agreeing the project design. It is good practice to ensure that a written agreement is in place before the studentship commences.

What are the benefits of collaborative PhDs?

For students, collaborative PhDs can enhance their capacities as researchers by giving them a sense of how research questions can be framed in dialogue with a partner organisation, and by enhancing their skills in public engagement and their understanding of how to make an impact with their research. It should also enhance their employability by giving them insight into how organisations work and developing their skills in, for instance, project planning and team-working. Some students benefit from time spent in a more structured work environment.

For the partner organisation, the scheme offers the chance to recruit a talented researcher to work on a project of direct relevance to the organisation's own priorities. This often serves as a springboard for future collaboration, whether with the researcher him/herself, or with the HEI.

What input should the proposed collaborating supervisor have into the student's research proposal?

The proposal should embody applicant's own thinking. But all applicants receive feedback on draft proposals from prospective academic supervisors, and it is reasonable for collaborating supervisors to provide feedback of this kind, focusing in particular on what the collaborating partner organisation can offer. In some cases the student's proposal might be prompted by the partner organisation's indication of the kind of projects it would be keen to develop, but in these cases there must be plenty of scope for the student's own thinking to shape the proposal.

My organisation does not have staff with experience of academic research. Are we eligible to participate in collaborative PhDs?

Yes, provided that you are able to make a distinctive contribution to advising the student. The University supervisor has primary responsibility for the progress of a student's doctoral research. The non-University supervisor will bring specific expertise about collections, resources, people, processes, and sector knowledge that are vital to the success of the research project, and which would not be possible without the collaboration.

The NWCDTP ran a training workshop for non-HEI supervisors in July 2016 and this is something that could be offered again if there is demand.

What kind of time commitment is involved in supervising a collaborative PhD?

A full-time student will meet his/her academic supervisor(s) at least once a month, and usually more frequently. Whether it is necessary for collaborating supervisors to participate in these regular meetings will depend upon the nature of the expertise they contribute, but it would be reasonable to assume that at least four meetings a year will be needed, together with associated preparation (reading of the student's work). Again, collaborating supervisors may or may not have the expertise needed to give detailed feedback on the student's written work, but there may be particular sections of the thesis where their input is especially important.

What does the studentship provide for the student?

UK students who are successful in the competition receive a maintenance stipend and their fees for the three years of the programme. They are also able to apply for funds to support conference participation and research travel. They are able to apply to our Cohort Development Fund for funds to support the organisation of research activities (conferences, workshops etc). In addition, we have funds that give allow a studentship to be extended to permit (e.g.) a placement in a non-HEI organisation. This last opportunity is one that could be especially valuable in the case of collaborative PhDs: in addition to working on the PhD project, the student might, e.g., undertake a placement of (perhaps) 3-6 months in which they would work on a distinct project defined by or in conjunction with the partner organisation.

Is the non-HEI partner expected to make a financial contribution?

This is not a requirement. But it can strengthen the application if a contribution can be made towards the additional costs of collaboration – e.g. the student's travel between the HEI and the partner organisation. If a financial contribution of this kind is not possible or appropriate, it would be helpful to indicate what in-kind contributions are likely to be available (e.g. desk space when the student is working on the partner organisation's premises).

Who should write the letter of support and what should it contain?

The letter may come either from the proposed supervisor or from a senior manager in the organisation, but in either case it should be clear both who the proposed supervisor is and that the organisation is willing in principle to support his or her involvement in the project. It should indicate in broad terms what kind of contribution the organisation can make to the project, e.g. the nature of the supervisory input envisaged and whether any other financial or in-kind contributions are likely.

We do not at this stage need a formal agreement. That can wait until a studentship has been awarded.

What are the chances of success?

NWCDTP studentships are awarded through open competition and there is no ring-fencing of a certain number of awards for collaborative projects. Everything depends therefore on the quality of the project and our assessment of the strengths of the applicant. Statistically the success rate is of the order of 16%. Please bear this in mind in supporting an application.